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ABSTRACT

In response to a paper by E. Culpepper Clark, Eva M. McMahan, and Michael J. Hyde that calls for the application of hermeneutic theory to the study of the oral history interview, this paper notes problems in the relationships between the proposed research design and the conceptual framework for the proposed research. While conceding that the proposed research holds great promise for achieving its long-range aim of theory construction and testing, the paper argues that the conceptual bases for the research contain ambiguities that must be resolved if the ultimate theoretical promise is to be realized. It discusses the methodological problems created by two sources of ambiguity in the conceptual bases for the research: (1) the nature of the theoretical framework derived from philosophical hermeneutics is ambivalent, and (2) the conceptual nature of the rules perspective adopted by the researchers is unclear. It then proposes the assumption of a rule-governing perspective as a means for resolving the conflict. (GT)

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Investigating the Oral History Interview as Hermeneutic Conversation: A Critical Appraisal of Research Directions

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As a response to the paper presented by Professors Clark, McMahan and Hyde, my comments will focus on the relationship between the research design and the conceptual framework for the proposed research. In particular, I will examine the constraints which the conceptual framework places on : (1) strategies of data collection and disposition; and (2) the nature of theory which logically may be derived from the collected data.

Prior to this analysis, two general comments are in order. First, the proposed research represents, in my view, an innovative approach to research and theory-building in a discipline presently groping for paradigms peculiar to its substance. By insisting that systematic observation, description, and interpretation should precede the construction of theory, the proposed research follows the best traditions associated with the development of a mature social science.[1] Second, the research design represents a sensible middle ground between a linear approach to discovering data and deliberate non-linearity.[2] While a general set of discovery categories are stipulated, the design allows for systematic modification of the descriptive units in view of discovered data. Furthermore, the design includes procedures for eliciting the participants' understandings of the communication interaction. These strategies should provide reasonable insurance that a priori assumptions will not blind the researchers to unanticipated regularities or meanings.[3]

I believe the proposed research holds great promise for achieving its long-range aim of theory construction and testing.

Nevertheless, I will argue that the conceptual bases for research contain ambiguities which must be resolved if the ultimate theoretical promise is to be realized. Two major conceptual themes may be identified. The dominant conceptual framework is, of course, that derived from philosophical hermeneutics. A second theoretical base is represented by the social rules perspective.[4] In the context of this proposal, the rules perspective is subsumed by the hermeneutical framework and treated more as an analytical tool than an independent theoretical basis for conducting naturalistic research. Nevertheless, I will show that the conceptual nature of rules places constraints on the research design which interface with those imposed by the dominant paradigm of philosophical hermeneutics. Two sources of ambiguity in these conceptual bases are apparent: (1) the nature of the theoretical framework derived from philosophical hermeneutics is ambivalent; and (2) the conceptual nature of the rules perspective is unclear. I will discuss the methodological problems created by these ambiguities and conclude my remarks by suggesting one means by which they may be resolved.

Problem number one: The ambivalence of the hermeneutical conceptual framework. In developing the hermeneutical framework for research, the authors propose to establish " a philosophical-theoretical base which elucidates how the process of interpretation occurs" and to use this base "to direct [subsequent] observation and description...." (emphasis theirs). This descriptive base is established by conceptualizing and operationalizing the oral history interview as a "hermeneutical situation." The conceptual conflict

emerges when the researchers go beyond the stated objective of describing how the process of interpretation occurs, and begin to prescribe how the process of interpretation should occur. Specifically, we are told that an optimal exploitation of the linguistic possibilities contained within a given synchronic moment can occur only with the achievement of "hermeneutical conversation." Further, the authors state that "hermeneutical conversation materializes only when conflict evolves through communication interactions that adhere to the dialectical process [es] " conceptualized by Gadamer.[5] Thus, the ambivalence or conflict inherent in the hermeneutical framework derives from: (1) the provision of both a descriptive and a prescriptive framework for directing research activity; and (2) the failure to clarify the separate roles which each should play in defining research strategies and constructing theory.

The resulting problem is that the two conceptualizations place contridictory constraints upon the research design and its ultimate theoretical yield. The descriptive theoretical framework introduces constraints which adhere to the typical pattern of naturalistic inquiry. These include: (1) a phenomenological search for descriptive units and the regularities which describe their organization; (2) modification of the descriptive framework based on discovered data; and (3) the construction of "grounded theory",[6] i.e. generalized descriptions of empirical regularities. On the other hand, the prescriptive framework introduces constraints which are, in most respects, antithetical to the nature and purpose of naturalistic inquiry as a way of knowing. For instance,

a prescriptive base directs the researcher to a discovery process which is dangerously close to hypothesis testing, since reality, or "what actually is" is being explored with reference to a paradigm which prescribes "what ought to be." Furthermore, the nature of the theory is not limited to grounded theory, but would include what Glaser and Strauss have called "logico-deductive theory."[7] Such theory ordinarily takes the form of specifying antecedent conditions which the theorist speculates will facilitate achievement of the prescribed ideal.

The proposed research design indicates that the prescriptive framework of hermeneutical conversation and its non-naturalistic constraints become problemmatic only in response to research question number three. The question asks: "What patterns of content and structure in the recorded interviews approximate the paradigm of hermeneutical conversation?" The authors respond by assuming that the paradigm of hermeneutical conversation <u>will, in fact, be achieved</u> in each of the 48 recorded interviews. In short, the researchers avoid confronting the non-naturalistic constraints imposed by their prescriptive theoretical base by treating a "hermeneutical situation" and "hermeneutical conversation" as if they were functionally equivalent. In so doing, they leave unanswered the essence of the research question which calls for: (1) a methodology for assessing whether, and to what extent, the discovered realities approximate the ideal of hermeneutical conversation; (2) a discussion of contingencies for disposing of the collected data when discovered regularities diverge from the paradigm; and (3) an indication of the nature of the theory they expect to emerge from the comparative data. The failure of the

researchers to address these issues leaves the paradigm of hermeneutical conversation with no clear role to play in defining research strategies or constructing theory. I believe a satisfactory resolution of this problem is dependent in part on the manner in which the researchers resolve a second problem associated with the conceptual base. I will now turn to a discussion of that problem.

The conceptual nature of the rules perspective adopted by the researchers is unclear. A major aim of the proposed research is the discovery of "rules [which] govern the organization of interaction during the oral history interview." The authors state that the obtained results, which they characterize as "analytical grounding," will "provide a foundation upon which subsequent theoretical explanations of oral history interview conversation can be tested." At no time do the authors clarify explicitly their conception of the relationship between discovered rules and subsequent theory. This ambiguity raises questions about the conceptual properties of the rules perspective which the researchers have adopted. Specifically: (1) Do the researchers view rules as legitimate theoretical explanations of communication behaviors? or (2) Are rules seen as descriptive regularities which are presuppositional to the development of causal covering law explanations of communication behaviors? Adherence to the former rule-governing perspective implies acceptance of the following assumptions: (1) that man's communication behaviors are often prompted by intentions, not causal antecedent conditions; (2) that communication behaviors are carried out to achieve intentions; (3) that rules reflect

regularities linking man's intentions and his communication behaviors; and (4) that rules, by virtue of their intention-behavior linkage function are sufficient to generate or cause communication behaviors.[8] Acceptance of this rule-governing perspective implies that the discovered rules will themselves constitute the "subsequent theoretical explanations to be tested." On the other hand, adherence to a rule-conforming perspective implies that the discovered rules will serve simply as a descriptive springboard from which to formulate subsequent theory. Such theory presumably will represent law-like models of communication behaviors enacted in the oral history interview.

A Proposed Resolution of the Problems . I suggested earlier that the manner in which the rules ambiguity is resolved has important implications for resolving the conceptual conflict I have attributed to the hermeneutical framework. Specifically, I believe that assuming a rule-governing perspective provides one means for resolving the conflict. My reasoning follows. Acceptance of the view that rules link intentions or goals with communication behaviors which facilitate the achievement of those goals implies that rules are not only descriptions of behavioral repertoires, but are also prescriptions for goal-achievement. Such prescriptions are shaped by one's culture, one's self-concept, and by the particular social reality one presently is enacting.[9] That social reality may be a social engagement, a business meeting, or in the case of this research, an oral history interview. If one accepts the view that rules possess both descriptive and prescriptive

qualities, then conceptually discrete roles for the descriptive as well as the prescriptive hermeneutical framework may be defined. Because of their descriptive quality, discovered regularities can be described, interpreted, and tested with reference to the descriptive conceptualization of the oral history interview as a hermeneutical situation. Further, the regularities can provide the basis for modifying the descriptive framework in view of discovered realities. Such research activity is consistent with the basic tenets of naturalistic inquiry. Furthermore, because rules are inherently prescriptive, the possibility is open for using the paradigm of hermeneutical conversation as a conceptual base from which to formulate and test intention-behavior-linkages appropriate to the oral history interview as a situationally-specific social reality. Adoption of a rule-conforming perspective, on the other hand, leaves the prescriptive paradigm of hermeneutical conversation without a clearly defined role to play in defining research strategies and constructing theoretical explanations of oral history interviewing.

NOTES

[1] Leonard C. Hawes, "Alternative Theoretical Bases: Toward a Presuppositional Critique," Communication Quarterly, 25 (Winter, 1977), 63-68; Joseph Kockelmans, ed., Phenomenology (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

[2] Gerry Philipsen, "Linearity of Research Design in Ethnographic Studies of Speaking," Communication Quarterly, 25 (Summer, 1977), 42-50.

[3] Leonard Schatzman and Anselm L. Strauss, Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.,1973); Edwin P. Willems and Harold L. Raush, eds., Naturalistic Viewpoints in Psychological Research (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969); Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

[4] Donald P. Cushman, "The Rules Perspective as a Theoretical Basis for the Study of Human Communication," Communication Quarterly, 25 (Winter, 1977), 30-45; Donald P. Cushman and W. Barnett Pearce, "Generality and Necessity in Three Types of Theory about Human Communication, with Special Attention to Rules Theory," Human Communication Research,4 (Summer, 1977), 344-353; Donald P. Cushman and Gordon C. Whiting, "An Approach to Communication Theory: Toward Consensus on Rules," Journal of Communication, 22 (1972), 219-220.

[5] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming. (N.Y.: The Seaburg Press, 1975).

[6] Glaser and Strauss, pp. 2-6.

[7] Glaser and Strauss, pp. 3-5.

[8] Cushman, "The Rules Perspective," 1977; Jesse G. Delia, "Alternative Perspectives for the Study of Human Communication: Critique and Response," Communication Quarterly, 25 (Winter, 1977), 46-62.

[9] Cushman, "The Rules Perspective," 1977, pp. 39-41; Delia, 1977, pp. 59-60.